

The Muses' Playground

Epic in Antiquity

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Lecture 2

This module

- ‘This module focuses on three epics (in any given year this may include Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Apollonius Rhodius’ *Argonautica*, Vergil’s *Aeneid*, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Lucan’s *Pharsalia*, Statius’ *Thebaid* and *Achilleid*, Silius Italicus’ *Punica*, Valerius Flaccus’ *Argonautica*, Quintus Smyrnaeus’ *Posthomerica*, Nonnus’ *Dionysiaca* or the *Orphic Argonautica*) and provides students with a detailed study of the genre of epic. The module highlights the historical development of the genre and the importance of intertextuality for the appreciation particularly of later epic, but also considers overarching themes such as descriptions of warfare, portrayals of gods and use of mythology. The module also allows students to develop their methodological skills by applying, for instance, narratological, historicist, and gender-focussed readings, to the studied texts.’

Module structure

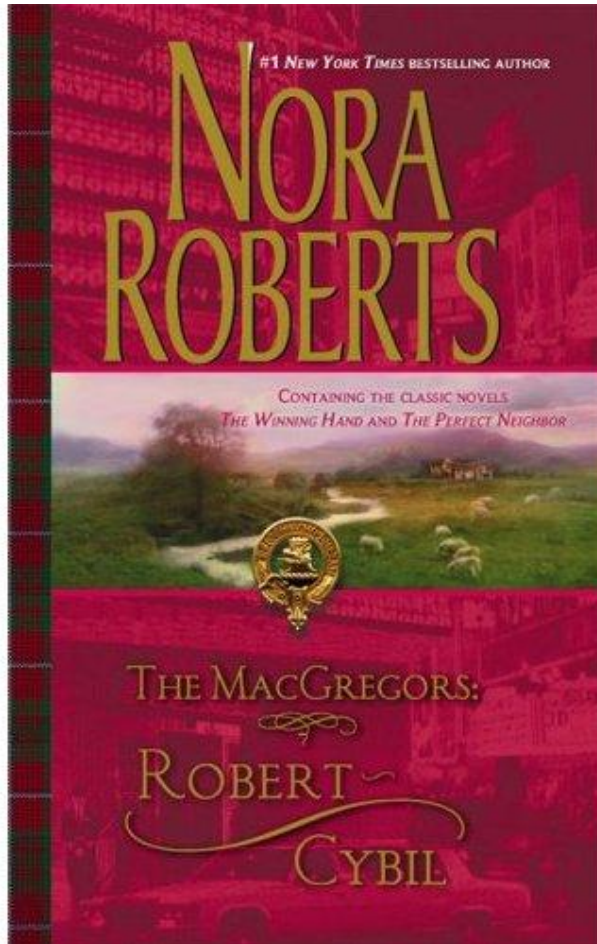
- First block: The epic genre
- Second block: Early epics from Greece and Rome
 - Including Homer, Apollonius Rhodius, Livius Andronicus and Ennius
- Third block: A classical epic
 - Vergil's *Aeneid*
- Fourth block: An epic challenge
 - Ovid's *Metamorphoses*
- Fifth block: Old-style epic for a new time?
 - Lucan's *Civil War*

Why should we care about genre?

‘As a means of channelling and clarifying communication between authors and readers (or between performers and audience), a shared genre acts as an agreement concerning the horizon of expectation, whether about the language, motifs, characterizations, themes, or even length of a given work.’

(Martin, 2009, 11)

Genre signals today: framing the story



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So what does 'epic' mean...

- 'In the modern world epic as a genre of poetry is no more: in lamenting its passing we can mimic one of the most characteristic activities of the form, grieving for what is lost, whether it be a dead hero or a vanished age.'

(Rutherford, 2005, 17)

- In most common usage, epic poetry is associated closely with the Homeric poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*
- ...and what we see as genre signals (framings) for the epic genre later on is usually features found in Homer as well

Aristotle and epic

- The view of Homer as the epitome of epic relies not only on date and precedence, but also on Aristotle's comments on epic in the *Poetics*
- Aristotle does not offer a tightly phrased definition of what constitutes epic poetry, but delineates the genre in a rather circuitous way

Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449b

Epic poetry agreed with tragedy only in so far as it was a metrical representation of heroic action, but inasmuch as it has a single meter and is narrative in that respect they are different. And then as regards length, tragedy tends to fall within a single revolution of the sun or slightly to exceed that, whereas epic is unlimited in point of time; and that is another difference, although originally the practice was the same in tragedy as in epic poetry. The constituent parts are some of them the same and some peculiar to tragedy. Consequently any one who knows about tragedy, good and bad, knows about epics too, since tragedy has all the elements of epic poetry, though the elements of tragedy are not all present in the epic. With the representation of life in hexameter verse [...] we will deal later.'

Features highlighted:

- Consistent use of one meter (hexameter)
- 'Heroic' characters and action
- Action more expansive than such seen in tragedy
 - Cf. *Poetics* 1456a:
 - One must remember, as we have often said, not to make a tragedy an epic structure: by epic I mean made up of many stories—suppose, for instance, one were to dramatize the *Iliad* as a whole. The length of the *Iliad* allows to the parts their proper size, but in plays the result is full of disappointment

Does epic mean long?

We come now to the art of representation which is narrative and in meter. Clearly the story must be constructed as in tragedy, dramatically, round a single piece of action, whole and complete in itself, with a beginning, middle and end, so that like a single living organism it may produce its own peculiar form of pleasure. It must not be such as we normally find in history, where what is required is an exposition not of a single piece of action but of a single period of time, showing all that within the period befell one or more persons, events that have a merely casual relation to each other. [...] Yet most of the poets do this. So in this respect, too, compared with all other poets Homer may seem, as we have already said, divinely inspired, in that even with the Trojan war, which has a beginning and an end, he did not endeavor to dramatize it as a whole, since it would have been either too long to be taken in all at once or, if he had moderated the length, he would have complicated it by the variety of incident. As it is, he takes one part of the story only and uses many incidents from other parts, such as the Catalogue of Ships and other incidents with which he diversifies his poetry.

(Aristotle, *Poetics* 1459a)

- Epic is different from history writing, and events described must converge to the same result
- Homer praised for being more tightly focussed than other epic writers
 - One short episode (wrath of Achilles, and ensuing events, for the *Iliad*)
- ...but we also begin to see praise for Homer's narrative technique
 - These will be found to be decisive framings by both writers and critics of epic later on

Aristotle, *Poetics* 1459b

The next point is that there must be the same varieties of epic as of tragedy: an epic must be "simple or complex," or else turn on "character" or on "calamity." The constituent parts, too, are the same with the exception of song and spectacle. Epic needs reversals and discoveries and calamities, and the thought and diction too must be good. All these were used by Homer for the first time, and used well. Of his poems he made the one, the *Iliad*, a "simple" story turning on "calamity," and the *Odyssey* a "complex" story—it is full of "discoveries"—turning on character. Besides this they surpass all other poems in diction and thought.

- Turn on character or calamity??
 - i.e. a piece can be character driven or focussing on describing emotion or complexes of emotions
- Note the variety afforded to the epic genre as well – a range of topics open to the authors
- In terms of impact on later writers and audiences, this is perhaps tempered by the emphasis on Homer in the following paragraph

Poetics 1459b: Epic means narratological artifice

Epic has a special advantage which enables the length to be increased, because in tragedy it is not possible to represent several parts of the story as going on simultaneously, but only to show what is on the stage, that part of the story which the actors are performing; whereas, in the epic, because it is narrative, several parts can be portrayed as being enacted at the same time. If these incidents are relevant, they increase the bulk of the poem, and this increase gives the epic a great advantage in richness as well as the variety due to the diverse incidents; for it is monotony which, soon satiating the audience, makes tragedies fail.

- Homeric examples?
 - Tracking of both sides in the *Iliad*
 - Action of the *Odyssey* split between Telemachus and Odysseus
 - ‘Flashback’ – retrospective narrative

Poetics: Epic means hexameter

Experience has shown that the heroic hexameter is the right meter. Were anyone to write a narrative poem in any other meter or in several meters, the effect would be wrong. The hexameter is the most sedate and stately of all meters and therefore admits of rare words and metaphors more than others, and narrative poetry is itself elaborate above all others. The iambic and the trochaic tetrameter are lively, the latter suits dancing and the former suits real life. Still more unsuitable is it to use several meters as Chaeremon did. (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1459-60a)

- Meter and content closely linked
- Meter and genre hierarchy closely linked
- Aristotle (*Poetics* 1448b) explains the hierarchy in terms of how noble characters each genre used

Poetics: Epic means a subtle narrator

Homer deserves praise for many things and especially for this, that alone of all poets he does not fail to understand what he ought to do himself. The poet should speak as seldom as possible in his own character, since he is not "representing" the story in that sense. Now the other poets play a part themselves throughout the poem and only occasionally "represent" a few things dramatically, but Homer after a brief prelude at once brings in a man or a woman or some other character, never without character, but all having character of their own. (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1460a)

- The narrator speaks in his own character only for 24 lines in total in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*
- Most of the narrative of both the Homeric epics are told by an all-knowing narrator but focalised through one of the characters of the story, e.g. Achilles, or Odysseus
 - Both of whom, of course, also have passages of direct speech with narrative sections
- Aristotle here draws the attention to the carefully structured focalisation of the epic narrative; this remains a key research area today
 - Cf. notably works by Irene De Jong

Aristotle and modern definitions

- Aristotles gradual definition of epic has influenced Western writers and audiences ever since its appearance
- Homer given precedence
 - But cf. pre- and post-Romanticism attitudes to authors of epic
- Focus on formal criteria in defining the genre

Epic poetry: standard definitions today

- Content on a cosmic scale and with a serious purpose
- Setting in a distant historical past
- Heroic and supernatural characters
- Plot focussed on wars and quests
- Length of poem
- 'Song style'
- Highly rhetorical speeches given by characters
- Opening invocations
- Extensive similes

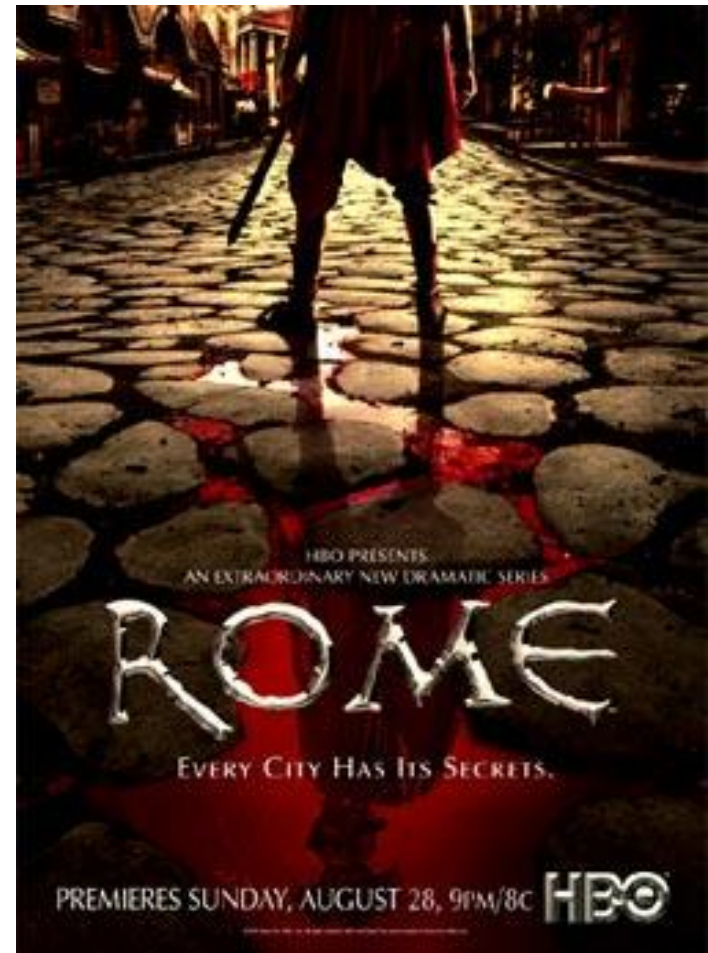
...most of which correspond closely to Aristotle's delineation of the genre

Is there more to it?

- ...or does Aristotle give us the ultimate word on what epic is?
- Aristotle as coloured by his time
 - While aware of the impact of oral performance on Homer's epics, in Aristotle's own time, epic was a text-bound literary genre – his description may be very different from the way in which the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* 'started out' as oral performances
 - The notion of 'the best' and competition: tragedy is Aristotle's main topic, and his discourse is influenced by the need to choose one winning text/piece and thus eclipsing others, whose works may have given us a different impression of the genre
- ...and remember, Aristotle and with him, Homer, influences the whole of the ensuing Western epic tradition

Homer is not the answer to everything

- We run the risk of adopting too rigid a definition if we follow Aristotle's theory in an uncritical way
 - Cf. works that almost fit – e.g. Hesiod's *Works and Days* and the *Theogony*
 - Cf. also that we still, in some fashion, consider this genre to be productive...
 - 'Truly Epic TV: Sexy, Blood Soaked, Beautiful and Even Educational'



Genre shelf life

- A literary genre only retains author and audience interest when it continually tests its limits
 - By interacting with other genres in new ways
 - By adopting topics until then felt to be unsuitable for the genre
 - By omitting features until then felt to be crucial framings

Evolving epic

- We will see examples of this testing of limits throughout the module
- There is very little Homer in this course because Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are but a part of what antiquity achieved in terms of epic

To take away

- Epic is defined differently in different times and settings
- Western epic determined to a great extent by Homer, via Aristotle
- Aristotle's appreciation of features in Homer coincides to a large extent with handbook definitions of what ancient epic is
- All literary genres evolve over time and through interaction with other genres (form, and content)